

## Chapter 2: The Planning Process

### Introduction

Work on the comprehensive conservation plan for Swan Lake NWR began in 2006. This chapter describes key points in planning, public involvement, issues and opportunities identified for Swan Lake NWR, the publication of the Draft CCP, public review and comment period for the Draft CCP, and the additional public review and comment period for Alternative 4.

### Meetings and Involvement

The comprehensive conservation planning process began with the CCP planning team holding a “kick-off” meeting in October 2006. Members of the planning team, which includes Refuge staff and Service planners, identified a list of issues and concerns associated with management of Swan Lake NWR. These preliminary issues and concerns were based on staff knowledge of the area and discussions with citizens in the community.

The CCP planning team then invited Refuge neighbors, organizations, local government agencies, and local staff of national and state government agencies, schools, and interested citizens to share their thoughts in an open house meeting on January 11, 2007, at the Refuge Visitor Center. More than 75 people attended the open house. We received 70 responses with dozens of individual comments by the close of the scoping period on February 22, 2007. Following the public comment period, an additional meeting was held in the Fish and Wildlife Service Regional Office to review the public comments and identify concerns from subject specialists.

A Biological Program Review, which is an evaluation of the relevance and direction of the biological program through the collective inputs of professionals among the various fields of ecology and wildlife sciences, began with a 2-day meeting on February 21 and 22 of 2007. The Regional Refuge Biologist facilitated the event, which was attended by 16 individuals with various state, federal, and academic affiliations. Information was presented on the Ref-



*Sign repair at Swan Lake NWR. Photo credit: USFWS*

uge, the general ecology of the region, establishing legislation and policy directives, current issues facing the Refuge, prior program accomplishments, a report on the current biological inventory and monitoring program, and a draft vision for the future.

The meeting was punctuated with field trips to specific sites to stimulate discussion and demonstrate issues of concern. The group discussed management alternatives and potential strategies, identified potential biological program priorities, discussed the draft goals and objectives for the various program components and other ideas for the future of the program.

### Summary of Issues, Concerns, and Opportunities

Issues play an important role in planning. Issues focus the planning effort on the most important topics and provide a base for considering alternative approaches to management and evaluating the consequences of managing under these alternative approaches. The issues, concerns, and opportunities expressed during the first phase of planning have been sorted and summarized into a number of issue statements along with fuller explanations that include background information and comments.

**Issue Statement:** The decline in Canada Goose use of the Refuge in recent decades has decreased the quality of goose hunting, drawn fewer hunters and wildlife watchers, and changed the cultural identity of the local communities.

**Background:** Beginning in the 1950s, use of the Refuge by wintering Canada Geese steadily increased until it peaked in 1977 at 181,000 birds. The large numbers of geese produced a spectacle that annually attracted hunters and wildlife watchers to this rural area and prompted the nearby town of Sumner, Missouri, to adopt the slogan “Wild Goose Capital of the World” and to erect a 40-foot Canada Goose statue known as “Maxi.”

The decades following the peak saw a steady decline in the number of geese wintering on the Refuge. This diminished the annual spectacle, which drew fewer visitors and affected the prosperity and notoriety of the local communities. One popular belief is that a reduction in the amount of agriculture on Refuge lands is responsible for lower goose use of the area and that farming more acres would increase goose numbers. This view is not supported by studies of the Canada Goose population that show a variety of factors interact to affect their distribution. These include increased availability of habitats across the landscape, fall and winter weather conditions, and variations in hunting pressure along the migratory flyway.

**Issue Statement:** The Refuge attracts high numbers of waterfowl and other wildlife, making it appealing as a sanctuary as well as for those interested in hunting and other wildlife-dependent recreation.

**Background:** Despite lower numbers of wintering Canada Geese, the Refuge still harbors abundant wildlife, notably ducks and white-tailed deer. Although goose hunting has been allowed for years, duck hunting has never been permitted at the Refuge. There is an increasing interest in allowing duck hunting on the Refuge in part to offset the decline in the quality of goose hunting. Others would prefer there be less or no hunting on the Refuge and instead support maintaining the Refuge as a sanctuary for waterfowl and other wildlife.

**Issue Statement:** Accumulation of sediment over several decades has decreased the depth and water holding capacity of Silver Lake and affected water quality.

**Background:** Silver Lake serves as a reservoir that supplies water for management of wetland units across the Refuge. It also provides fishing opportunities. The average volume of Silver Lake has decreased by about 25 percent from 1983 to present. Through the years, sediment carried from

the 64,000-acre watershed by Turkey Creek and Elk Creek accumulated in Silver Lake, decreasing the depth and water holding capacity of the basin and reducing its water clarity. If this continues it would threaten wetland management across the Refuge. It also decreases the quality of the habitat for sport fish. Although changes in land use practices within the watershed in recent years are believed to have slowed the sedimentation rate, there are no measurements to support this.

**Issue Statement:** There are diverse and sometimes conflicting expectations regarding the presence, variety, and abundance of Refuge wildlife.

**Background:** Many people made specific suggestions regarding management of Refuge habitats or wildlife populations. Suggestions included:

- increasing the number of pheasants, quail, or deer
- decreasing the numbers of deer or predators
- reintroducing Prairie Chickens
- managing more intensively for waterfowl
- managing less intensively for waterfowl

Developing guidance regarding Refuge habitat and population management that considers public input, Refuge purposes, the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System, and other Service policies is one outcome of the comprehensive conservation planning process.

**Issue Statement:** Slow water movement out of the Grand River Watershed during high water events increases duration of flooding on the Refuge and surrounding private lands.

**Background:** The nearly 12-mile Garden of Eden levee south of the Refuge protects 3,500 acres of land from flooding during high water events. The levee also narrows the outlet of the Grand River



*Flooding is a significant issue facing Swan Lake NWR. Photo credit: USFWS*

Watershed from 5 miles to about one-half mile. Floodwaters that accumulate across thousands of acres must funnel through this narrowed outlet. This slows water movement and aggravates flood severity and duration within the watershed. Severe flooding often damages Refuge roads and facilities, impedes management capabilities, and in some cases degrades wildlife habitat. Sluggish drainage also affects lands adjoining the Refuge, especially if Refuge pools are at or near capacity when flooding begins.

**Issue Statement:** Refuge waters could be managed to create more favorable fishing opportunities.

**Background:** Although fishing occurs on Refuge waters, there has been little emphasis on improving the quality of the sport fishery. A 2007 fisheries survey of Silver Lake, where most fishing occurs, reported it as shallow, turbid, and lacking deep water habitat and structure, none of which indicate a quality sport fishery. Wind action across the shallow basin churns sediment and reduces water clarity, hampering the growth of aquatic plants that would otherwise serve as fish habitat. Only four of 14 species captured during the survey were sport fish, but these four species – white crappie, freshwater drum, flathead catfish, and channel catfish – accounted for nearly half of the total fish sampled. A number of people commented that Silver Lake should be made deeper to improve fish habitat. Others suggested removing rough fish and stocking game fish.

**Issue Statement:** There are threats to the ecological integrity of Refuge ecosystems and opportunities for restoration and enhancement of native habitats and rare species.

**Background:** Service policy supports maintaining and, where appropriate, restoring biological integrity, diversity, and environmental health. There are a number of threats to these elements, including the introduction and spread of invasive plants, declining water quality, and flooding. There are also opportunities to restore drainage pathways and native habitat. This includes habitat restoration that would benefit the eastern massasauga rattlesnake, a candidate for federal listing under the Endangered Species Act, which is found on the Refuge.

**Issue Statement:** There is demand for wildlife-dependent recreation opportunities, other public uses, and facilities beyond what is presently available.

**Background:** Service policy encourages national wildlife refuges to provide opportunities for six wildlife dependent public uses: hunting, fishing, wildlife observation, wildlife photography, environmental education, and interpretation. Additionally, Swan



Swan Lake NWR. Photo credit: FWS

Lake NWR provides visitors opportunities for gathering berries, mushrooms, or shed antlers. Zoning of these uses in both duration and extent helps avoid conflicts between user groups. A number of comments supported increasing the duration, available area, or amount of facilities for one or more of the existing uses. Others suggested allowing additional uses. Any use permitted on the Refuge must be found compatible in accordance with Service policy.

**Issue Statement:** The amount of maintenance, management, and visitor services needs exceeds existing capacity to fulfill these needs.

**Background:** The Refuge staff is responsible for maintaining 26 miles of roads and levees, 20 water control structures, managing more than 800 acres of moist soil, assisting with the implementation of three hunts as well as other aspects of Refuge administration and management. Refuge maintenance, management, and programming have declined in recent years as the number of staff fell from a high of seven to two. This is compounded by aging infrastructure and increased demand for visitor services. A number of people commented that more staff is needed.

**Issue Statement:** Widely scattered parcels and easements beyond the Refuge boundary provide management challenges and opportunities.

**Background:** Refuge staff members are responsible for managing 46 easements and outlying fee title parcels scattered across 15 Missouri counties. Some of the properties have potential for habitat restoration and wildlife-dependent recreation opportunities that would help fulfill Refuge purposes and support the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System. But few staff and long distances mean these properties currently receive little attention.

**Issue Statement:** There is interest in maintaining the remnant bottomland forest community within the Yellow Creek Research Natural Area.

**Background:** The Yellow Creek Research Natural Area encompasses 1,000 acres of bottomland forest along Yellow Creek. According to guidance, Research Natural Areas are not to be actively managed so as to serve as a reference point for comparison with other bottomland forest areas. Log jams within Yellow Creek impede flow during high water events, causing flooding that affects the bottomland forest within the Research Natural Area.

## Alternatives Development

The practice of developing management alternatives as a part of the Refuge planning process is derived from the National Environmental Policy Act of 1970 (NEPA) [42 U.S.C. 4321 et seq.] This act requires federal agencies to consider the impacts of proposed actions and to develop a reasonable range of alternatives to those actions.

The development of an initial set of management alternatives occurred during the Refuge planning workshop in May 2007, and included representatives from the Service and Missouri Department of Conservation. Subsequent staff changes prolonged development of alternatives into 2009. Ultimately, a set of three alternatives was developed and included in an environmental assessment released for public review in 2010.

## Preparation, Review, and Finalization of the CCP

The CCP for Swan Lake NWR was prepared by a team consisting of Refuge and Regional Office staff, and a contractor. The first full draft was completed in May 2010. The CCP was then published in two phases, draft and final, in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). The Draft Environmental Assessment, Appendix A of the Draft CCP, presented a range of alternatives for future management and identified the preferred alternative, which was the basis for the CCP.

The Draft CCP/EA was first reviewed and revised by Refuge and Regional Office staff, a time period that culminated with an internal review meeting at the Midwest Regional Office on March 5, 2010. The Draft CCP/EA was then released to the public for a 35-day review period running from June 1 to July 5, 2010. The public was notified of the release with a notice in the Federal Register as well as through local media outlets.

A summary brochure or the full Draft CCP/EA was sent to approximately 200 individuals, organizations, elected officials, and local, state, and federal agencies; and an electronic copy was made available on the Service's website.

An open house was held during the comment period (June 22, 2010) at the Refuge Visitor Center, providing the public with an opportunity to discuss the plan with Service staff. An estimated 385 people attended the event and submitted more than 130 written comments.

Private citizens, local government officials, organizations, and conservation agencies submitted approximately 500 letters or e-mails during the public review period. Three elements of the Draft CCP drew the most comments: a proposal to periodically draw down Silver Lake to promote aquatic vegetation, a proposal to eliminate cropland on the Refuge, and a proposal to manage grasslands to promote the eastern massasauga rattlesnake.

In response to local concerns, a fourth alternative was developed and a second public review and comment period was held. Approximately 50 comments were received following the release of Alternative 4 in September 2010. Appendix L of the CCP includes a summary of the comments received during both comment periods and the Service's response to the comments.

The final CCP will become the basis for guiding management on the Refuge over the coming 15-year period. It will also guide the development of more detailed step-down management plans for specific resource areas, and it will underpin the annual budgeting process through Service-wide allocation databases. Most importantly, it will lay out the general approach to managing habitat, wildlife, and visitor services at Swan Lake NWR, and will direct day-to-day decision-making and actions.

## Wilderness Review

As part of the CCP process, lands within Swan Lake NWR were reviewed for wilderness suitability. No lands were considered suitable for Congressional designation as wilderness as defined by the Wilderness Act of 1964. Swan Lake NWR does not contain 5,000 contiguous acres of roadless, natural lands, nor does the Refuge possess any units of sufficient size to make their preservation practicable as wilderness. Refuge lands and waters have been substantially altered by humans, especially by agriculture, drain construction, and road-building. Extensive modification of natural habitats and manipulation of natural processes has occurred. Adopting a "hands-off" approach to management at the Refuge would not facilitate the restoration of a pristine or pre-settlement condition, which is the goal of wilderness designation.